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Internationalization of Higher Education and Immigration Policies: Reframing the Ethics of International Student Mobility in East Africa

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ABSTRACT

The mobility of higher education students within Africa has expanded considerably in recent years, raising urgent questions about the ethics of international education. This paper critically examines the ethical dimensions of international student mobility in East Africa, with emphasis on Uganda, a major and growing regional educational regional hub. Drawing on theoretical orientations from critical internationalization studies and postcolonial ethics, the study investigates how immigration policies and higher education policies intersect to shape international students' lived experiences. Using a mixed-methods research design, data were collected from 437 survey respondents and 16 in-depth interview participants, including students, university staff members, higher education officials, and one immigration officer. Quantitative data were analyzed with descriptive statistics using SPSS, while qualitative data underwent rigorous thematic analysis. Findings reveal that international students in Uganda, mainly originating from neighboring East African countries, face restrictive immigration regulations, particularly in relation to employment rights and opportunities for professional integration. Although regional protocols and agreements formally promote student mobility, international students in Uganda nevertheless encounter persistent administrative barriers, limited job opportunities, financial insecurities, and experiences of exclusion or marginalization. These contradictions highlight ongoing ethical tensions in how internationalization is currently conceptualized and practiced in resource-constrained contexts. The paper ultimately argues that East African countries urgently

need to rethink internationalization through frameworks of hospitality and reciprocity, and mutual responsibility, ensuring that student mobility supports both educational opportunity and human dignity.

Keywords: Higher Education; Internationalization; Immigration; Ethics; Student Mobility; East Africa

1. Introduction

Increased influxes of students seeking higher education (HE) services abroad are proof that the internationalization of higher education (IHE) continues to grow amidst globalization[1]. This has had implications for national policies that determine how higher education institutions (HEIs) participate in or benefit from international student mobility (ISM). In conjunction with foreign, economic, and security policies, particularly those about immigration and visa regulations, a nation's internationalization policy is crucial[2]. These policies relate to the general rationales for mobility for international students' sending and receiving countries. For instance, numerous nations are motivated to attract international students due to the cultural and monetary contributions made by these students[3].

International students foster mutual relationships between their home and host countries, which facilitates economic growth. According to Raphael[4], international students make a significant contribution to the host country's economy by paying for tuition fees, living costs and local services. Their presence also enriches the talent pool, fosters innovation and can lead to direct and indirect job creation through entrepreneurial and commercial activities. Some students utilize ISM to obtain permanent residency in the host country, as explained by Gribble[5]. Others use it to find work during their studies or after graduation[6].

Nonetheless, there is a relationship between the national and student rationales for ISM that shapes the overall mobility experience. Beyond these familiar narratives, however, there are several complex ethical dilemmas that are often overlooked in policy and academic discourse. These dilemmas concern the question of who can move, under what conditions, and with what rights once students arrive in the host country.

The objective of this paper is to examine the ethical challenges and contradictions in ISM within East Africa, focusing on Uganda as a case study. Specifically, the study investigates how immigration and HE policies interact to shape international students' opportunities, rights, and lived experiences. The significance of this research lies in its effort to highlight African perspectives and South–South dynamics in debates on internationalization, which are often dominated by global North contexts.

In this study, *ethical issues* refer to the tensions and injustices that emerge when internationalization policies prioritize institutional and national interests over student well-being, equity, or dignity. These include discriminatory visa policies, unequal access to work opportunities, and exclusionary practices that reinforce class, race, or regional hierarchies[7]. Ethics here are not neutral or universal; rather, they are politically situated and shaped by power relations between and within nations.

This paper considers issues of power, justice, and inequality that shape ISM within some East African countries[7]. It poses the questions: *What are the moral obligations that host countries owe to international students, particularly when both sending and receiving countries are located in the global South? How do immigration and HE policies in East Africa interact to shape ISM in addition to life chances, dignity, and aspirations of international students?* The paper notes that ISM is not a neutral process, but is shaped by national economic goals, labor market dynamics, and geopolitical hierarchies[8]. This makes it both an enabler and a hindrance that grants opportunities to some students while hindering such opportunities to others.

The working-age population in most developed economies has declined over time, increasing the demand for highly trained migrant labor in those countries[9]. One source of these workers is international students[10]. Governments in such countries have modified immigration and visa policies and processes to attract and integrate international students[6]. Although writers have used terms like "brain training" and "brain circulation" to characterize the phenomena, this is an attempt to hide the reality that the practice exposes developing nations to complete "brain loss"[10]. As a result, the skill pool essential for sustainable social and economic advancement is essentially reduced in developing

nations.

Moreover, the practice raises ethical questions since only those students better suited to contribute to the talent pool of the host nation are preferred[9]. Indeed, some international students are now more sought-after by host nations than others. This contradicts ISM's primary objective of encouraging global citizenship for all students, regardless of their natural differences[11]. This paper clarifies the ISM experience in developing countries.

The relevance of the HE sector regarding the attraction and retention of knowledge workers has increased such that HEIs now cooperate closely with the industrial sector and national immigration agencies for this purpose[12]. Nonetheless, certain nations have implemented strategies that have reduced inbound ISM. According to Rudge[2], the UK government's 'tougher stance' on immigration has decreased the number of international students in the country. This shows that ISM depends on contextual factors like time priorities and the investment in HE.

Contextual factors like the country's unemployment rate and labor market also impact a nation's migration policies, and hence ISM. For instance, the global North and the global South have different job conditions. Migrants including international students are subject to different legislation in the two regions. This paper considers the relationship between such regulations and ISM in the global South which is not well-represented in the literature on student migration studies.

Moreover, internationally mobile students are difficult to categorize; they might be considered migratory students or job seekers[13]. According to Brown[14], international students often experience financial hardships, besides not easily finding jobs in their host nations, whether as students or graduates. These students often lack trustworthy networks and are isolated from their support systems back home, yet they are often subject to employment visa restrictions[15]. Policy provisions enabling them to overcome financial and employment obstacles can improve their lived experiences. However, international students are desired because of their contributions to the host institutions[16], but they are at times treated with contempt since they could jeopardize employment, especially in countries with fewer job options. For students, institutions, and society at large, this complicates and entangles the benefits and challenges of ISM.

With a low job quality (just 20% of workers are in paid employment), and an insecure employment condition, Uganda's unemployment rate was 3.2% for adults and 5.3% for youth in 2020[17]. The proportion of waged workers in non-agricultural industries is almost 50% while three out of five young people work in unpaid jobs that support home businesses, primarily farms, and nearly 67% of Ugandans are self-employed or work in subsistence agriculture, further explains[17]. In a nation where many people are unemployed, supporting the hiring of international students may incite radicalism and xenophobia, as was the situation in South Africa in 2008 and 2009[18], and such is highlighted in this paper.

Issues surrounding work experience and employability among international students are under-theorized[19], and have not received much attention from researchers. The situation deteriorates in the global South, where knowledge production is scarce and unreliable[20]. Research on international students' rights to work prospects in their host countries is important to this study because it is essentially nonexistent in the literature.

Uganda was chosen as the focus of this study because it hosts the highest number of international students in East Africa, primarily from Kenya, Tanzania, South Sudan, Rwanda, and Burundi[21, 22]. As a regional hub, it provides a critical vantage point for examining both the opportunities and contradictions of intra-African student mobility. Uganda is also a signatory to the East African Community (EAC) Common Market Protocol, which formally promotes free movement of people and labor. Yet, in practice, immigration regulations remain restrictive, particularly regarding student employment. This makes Uganda a relevant case for analyzing how policy commitments to regional integration shape the lived experiences of international students.

While the Ugandan case is interesting, the study recognizes the variability within East Africa. Kenya and Tanzania, with relatively larger HE systems and labor markets, attract international students under different economic conditions compared to Rwanda and Burundi, where ISM is shaped by recovery dynamics and more fragile policy frameworks. Uganda sits at the intersection of these contexts: a regional education hub with high international student enrollment, but with labor policies that mirror the tensions across stable and fragile neighboring states. This scenario underscores

the importance of Uganda as a case study, while cautioning against overgeneralization across the region.

In summary, the paper contributes to internationalization studies by reframing ISM in East Africa as an ethical and political landscape rather than a purely economic or policy phenomenon. It highlights the contradictions of hosting students under restrictive immigration regimes and calls for rethinking internationalization in ways that prioritize reciprocity, hospitality, and justice. Hospitality refers to the welcoming, ethical, and supportive reception of international students by host institutions and communities, which includes openness to different perspectives and the sharing of resources[23]. On the other hand, reciprocity is an exchange that mutually benefits international students and host communities, not only by receiving but also by contributing knowledge, fostering meaningful interactions, and creating a fair and supportive environment[24].

2. Theoretical Framework

The paper is grounded in a critical internationalization perspective, which focuses on the ethics of ISM and how mobility is structured, experienced, and governed. Drawing on Stein[25], the paper advances that ethical frameworks are not static, universal principles, but socially and politically embedded processes. As further explained by Stein[25], ethics in ISM are never neutral or apolitical; rather, they are continually negotiated within unequal power relations and specific historical and geopolitical contexts. Who gets to move, under what conditions, and with what rights are questions shaped by policy, as well as the values and interests embedded within those policies.

This perspective is particularly useful for examining ISM in East Africa, where immigration and HE systems intersect with complex legacies of colonialism, regional integration, and economic inequality. Here, ethical considerations are not abstract ideals but lived realities, felt in the bureaucratic challenges students face at borders, in visa offices, and in unstable labor markets. With this framework, the paper considers immigration and internationalization policies not merely as administrative tools, but moral texts that speak about how nations understand hospitality, reciprocity and responsibility.

Building on this, the paper also utilizes Marginson's framing of students' rights as fundamental human rights to provide a lens for examining the moral obligations of host countries[26]. For Marginson, access to mobility, education, and protection are not privileges bestowed at the discretion of receiving states, but entitlements grounded in global justice. This is especially relevant in the context of South–South mobility, where resource constraints and uneven state capacity often complicate idealistic discourses of mutual exchange and regional solidarity.

This paper uses the two perspectives to highlight both what policies do and what they mean; what they reveal about whose goals are valued, whose contributions are accepted, and whose presence is conditionally tolerated. It also focuses on how East African countries, as postcolonial and post-conflict states, navigate the ethical aspects of hosting international students in a regional education space.

This study also draws from African decolonial scholarship, which situates education and mobility within the ongoing "coloniality of power"[27]. From this perspective, internationalization cannot be understood outside of the historical hierarchies that privilege Euro-American models of knowledge and governance while marginalizing African epistemologies. As wa Thiong'o argues in his call to "decolonize the mind," education remains a contested terrain where languages, values, and worldviews are negotiated[28]. These insights reinforce this study's argument that ISM in East Africa must be framed not only as a policy challenge but also as a struggle over justice, recognition, and epistemic sovereignty.

Therefore, this theoretical framework allows for a critical, historical, and moral understanding of ISM. It reinterprets ISM as an ethical landscape, where human dignity, policy, and national identity meet rather than just as a question of statistics, flows, or institutional strategy. By doing this, it encourages a more thorough examination of East Africa's immigration and HE policies, not only as tools of government but also as manifestations of disputed political and moral commitments.

3. Literature Review: Migration Industry and Ethics

International student mobility (ISM) is increasingly shaped by the "migration industry" — a network of insti-

tutions, agencies, and infrastructures that facilitate mobility[29, 30]. The migration industry supports ISM, but can also reproduce inequities, for instance, when informal payments or opaque recruitment practices become normalized.

A growing body of scholarship positions international students within broader migration studies, highlighting their ambiguous status: welcomed for their economic contributions but subject to suspicion and control[31, 32]. Such dynamics raise ethical concerns, especially when students are treated as desirable or undesirable migrants based on nationality or labor market utility.

In the African context, ISM is entangled with colonial legacies, regional integration, and fragile labor markets[20, 33]. While policy frameworks such as the East African Community Protocol promote mobility, implementation often lags behind. International students remain excluded from migration policy discourse, with limited attention given to their rights to work or participate fully in host societies[34].

In Uganda, as in most countries, international students must obtain appropriate travel and residency permits, often through specific administrative procedures[35]. ISM increasingly involves transnational aspirations, as students and researchers seek multiple qualifications and work experience across borders before returning home[10]. While expectations must align with local labor market conditions, students also require access to practical work experience during and after their studies—conditions that depend on host country legislation.

In principle, the international human rights framework protects the rights of international students, including the right to work under fair conditions[26]. Ideally, these students should not face discrimination in employment compared to their domestic peers. A supportive policy climate in both sending and receiving countries is therefore essential. Yet, research shows that international students are often disadvantaged by host-country policies[36], and their roles as global citizens are undermined[37]. Navigating both home and host country regulations, students are called upon to act not only as learners but also as ethically guided agents in complex migration systems. This dual burden invites reflection on how host nations, particularly those facing development constraints, fulfill their responsibilities to these students.

Uganda adopted progressive legal frameworks to manage the presence of foreigners, including international students, through processes such as visa issuance, border control, deportations, and citizenship applications[38]. Since 2016, advances in technology have improved border management, including the introduction of an online application system for visas and residence permits. These functions are overseen by the Directorate of Citizenship and Immigration Control and the National Citizenship and Immigration Board under the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

Uganda is also a signatory to the East African Community Common Market Protocol, which allows for the free movement of labor and people across member states[39]. This framework facilitates intra-regional student mobility. Despite their transnational movements and long-term stays in foreign cultural and linguistic contexts, international students are often excluded from mainstream migration policy discourse[34]. In Uganda, these students are legally required to hold authorized residency documents to remain enrolled[38].

The proportion of international students in Uganda's HEIs has declined over the past decade, falling from a peak of 9.5% in 2012–2013 to 7.1% in 2016–2017[40]. Excluding the effects of COVID-19-related travel restrictions, enrollment dropped by 0.92%, from 19,981 in 2019/2020 to 19,555 in 2020/2021[41]. While multiple factors may account for this decline, the mismanagement of international students' work rights and broader ISM opportunities likely contributed. Since ISM is grounded in ideals of hospitality and reciprocity, these developments call for critical scrutiny[6].

The ethical and regulatory foundations of ISM are challenged by the principles of hospitality and reciprocity which influence how international students and host societies interact[42]. A notable power asymmetry underpins this relationship: host countries and their citizens have the authority to accept or reject foreign students, while students are expected to conform and remain grateful. For ISM to be economically and socially sustainable, reciprocity must be seen not only as symbolic but also as institutional, with both mobile students and their home countries participating in the mutual exchange of benefits.

Coordinated interaction between national policy and institutional practice is widely acknowledged as essential to the future of ISM[43]. Yet, there is a lack of comprehensive analysis of how such coordination manifests in Uganda and other East African contexts. This gap may reflect the broader absence of coherent internationalization strategies

in many global South countries[44]. Existing literature has yet to fully explore the intersections between national migration policies and institutional student support systems in these settings.

ISM is also linked to structural limitations in home education systems. As argued by Waters[45], students often seek education abroad after failing to secure placement in competitive programs at home. While international education offers a pathway to overcome such barriers, students should not face additional obstacles once abroad. Literature on ISM has not sufficiently examined how immigration laws may ease or exacerbate these challenges.

Lomer describes international students in the UK as migrants, ambassadors, and educational resources, sometimes framed as possessing "cultural deficits"[46]. Such deficit discourses are linked to class-based passivity, underscoring how international students can be constructed as both valuable and deficient[32]. Lomer also emphasizes the dual role of international students as potential labor resources, especially in countries facing labor shortages[47]. This framing becomes problematic in contexts such as Uganda, where employment opportunities are limited and labor absorption remains weak.

ISM policies thus shape the academic and professional trajectories of international students, particularly through visa and immigration regulations. An integrated approach to ISM, one that aligns immigration frameworks with HE policies and labor market conditions requires robust infrastructure and inter-sectorial collaboration. This review positions ISM regulations and student migration laws as key components of that broader infrastructure, particularly in the context of sending and receiving countries in the global South.

Other approaches to immigration policy and ISM are revealed through global comparison. In Canada and Australia, for example, international students are granted post-study work visas and are permitted to take part-time employment during study. This has made these countries attractive destinations for talented students globally[19]. In contrast, while similarly presenting themselves as international education hubs, South Africa and Malaysia enforce more complex employment work requirements tied to quotas or academic performance[48]. Uganda's policy landscape, though aligned with East African integration goals through visa exemptions for EAC nationals, remains restrictive in granting employment rights. These contrasts underscore the need to critically assess how national policies align with internationalization goals and the lived realities of international students.

From an ethical perspective, hospitality and reciprocity provide useful concepts for evaluating how states and institutions engage with mobile students[42]. Yet the power asymmetry remains evident: host states can accept or reject students, while students are expected to adapt and remain grateful. This imbalance challenges the ideal of internationalization as mutual exchange.

Existing work on ISM often reproduces Eurocentric perspectives that privilege Northern models of mobility and ethics. By contrast, African scholars have highlighted the enduring influence of colonial legacies on education systems[28, 49]. Integrating such perspectives helps reframe intra-African student mobility as part of a wider project of decolonizing education, one that challenges global hierarchies of knowledge production while foregrounding African agency.

Gap in Literature. Despite growing work on internationalization in the global North, research on intra-African ISM, particularly the ethical and policy dimensions remains scarce. Few studies explore how immigration frameworks in East Africa shape students' rights, opportunities, and lived experiences. This study addresses that gap by highlighting African perspectives and critically examining ISM in Uganda.

4. Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods design, combining descriptive survey data with in-depth qualitative interviews. This approach enabled a nuanced understanding of the ethical and policy dimensions shaping ISM in East Africa. The central research question was: *What impact do immigration laws have on international students in East Africa?* To address this, the study explored the types of residence titles held by international students, the challenges involved in acquiring these titles, and the rights and restrictions associated with them. In this context, 'residence titles' refer to the official documents that authorize foreign nationals to enter and reside in Uganda. Uganda was selected as a case study due to its regional prominence and diversity of international students (see Introduction for details).

4.1. Rationale for University Selection

Makerere University (MU) and Kampala International University (KIU) were purposely selected as sites for this study due to their attributes. MU is Uganda's largest and oldest public university, and attracts students from across East Africa due to its academic reputation and relatively lower tuition fees. On the other hand, KIU is a major private university with a strong international profile, and hosts one of the largest populations of foreign students in the country. Studying these two institutions allowed for comparison across public and private settings, offering a more comprehensive picture of international student experiences in Uganda.

4.2. Questionnaire Design and Administration

Quantitative data were obtained through self-administered email questionnaires distributed to international students at KIU and MU. Questionnaire items were developed based on a review of existing literature on ISM, immigration, and student employment rights [6, 26]. The questionnaire included both closed-ended questions (e.g., Likert-scale and multiple-choice items) and open-ended prompts, covering areas such as immigration documentation, employment experiences, and perceptions of host country policies. To ensure content validity, the instrument was piloted with a small group of 15 students who were not included in the final sample. Minor revisions were made for clarity before full administration.

4.3. Participant Groups and Recruitment

Four participant groups were included: international students, university staff, officials from national HE councils, and an immigration officer. These groups were chosen because they represent key stakeholders in ISM: students provide first-hand information about ISM challenges; university staff shape day-to-day support and institutional policy; council officials articulate national HE frameworks; and the immigration officer provided state-level regulatory perspectives.

International students were recruited through international offices at MU and KIU, who distributed the survey link. For interviews, participants were purposively selected to ensure diversity in nationality, gender, and academic pro-gram. University staff and council officials were approached through formal institutional channels, while the immigration officer was identified and interviewed with official approval from Uganda's internal affairs ministry.

4.4. Demographics

Survey respondents (n = 437) represented diverse nationalities, with the majority from neighboring East African countries. Of the 16 interviewees, 10 were students (five males, five females, from South Sudan, Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, and Burundi), three were university staff members from MU and KIU, two were council officials, and one was an immigration officer.

4.5. Sampling Rationale

The accessible population included 970 international students (537 from MU and 433 from KIU). Using Slovin's formula ($n = N / (1 + Ne^2)$), with a 0.05 margin of error and a 95% confidence level, a sample size of 437 was determined (229 from MU and 208 from KIU). The international student offices distributed the survey link to eligible students. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed that their responses would remain anonymous.

4.6. Reliability Considerations

Internal consistency of the survey items was checked using Cronbach's alpha, which yielded acceptable reliability scores across the main domains ($\alpha > 0.70$). Data cleaning procedures were conducted prior to analysis to remove incomplete responses.

4.7. Qualitative Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 participants: one immigration officer, two staffs from national HE councils, two staff members from MU, one from KIU, and ten international students. Interview questions were designed to probe participants' experiences and perceptions of ISM policy and practice, including issues of access, work rights, and ethical dilemmas. Interviews were conducted between November 1st, 2022 and January 31st, 2023, lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, and were audio-recorded with consent. Recordings were transcribed verbatim.

4.8. Thematic Coding and Triangulation

Qualitative data were analyzed through the six-step approach to thematic analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke[50]. Transcripts were first read in full, coded inductively, and then organized into themes relating to immigration processes, employment restrictions, and ethical dilemmas. Coding was conducted manually by the author, with recurring codes compared across transcripts to ensure consistency. To strengthen credibility, themes were triangulated across the four stakeholder groups (students, university staff, council officials, and immigration officers). This allowed for cross-validation of findings and highlighted areas of convergence and divergence in perspectives. Representative quotes were selected to illustrate key themes.

4.9. Data Analysis and Integration of Methods

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS to generate descriptive statistics while qualitative narratives were examined through thematic analysis. Quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated during analysis and discussion. While the survey provided a broad overview of students' immigration and employment challenges, qualitative interviews offered depth and context, enabling a more comprehensive account of the ethical implications of ISM in Uganda.

As an East African researcher working within this policy context, I acknowledge my proximity to the topic. I therefore maintained a reflexive approach throughout the research process to ensure my analysis remains fair and grounded, while bringing an insider perspective that enriches the discussion.

I am a researcher affiliated with a Ugandan institution, and therefore occupied a dual position: an insider with contextual knowledge of HE systems and policy frameworks, yet also an outsider to the lived experiences of many international students from other African countries. This positioning shaped both access to participants and the nature of the interactions. I acknowledge the power asymmetries, especially in interviews with students who viewed me as aligned with institutional authority. To minimize these imbalances, I emphasized voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the value of participants' voices in shaping the study.

Beyond the stage of data collection, I also recognize that my positionality influenced how findings were interpreted. Familiarity with institutional contexts and cultural norms facilitated understanding, but it may also have predisposed me to privilege certain narratives over others. To address this, I adopted a reflexive stance during analysis by repeatedly revisiting transcripts with attention to how my assumptions might frame interpretation. Triangulation across data sources and participant groups was used to check for consistency and ensure that student voices were not overshadowed by those of staff or policymakers. This reflexive process does not eliminate subjectivity; rather, it acknowledges that meaning is co-constructed between researcher and participants, and that interpretation is situated within my own positional and epistemic standpoint.

5. Findings and Discussion

The findings are presented in four interrelated themes. We begin with the historical legacies that continue to shape mobility governance, before moving to current policy contradictions, structural inequalities, and their implications for skills development.

5.1. Colonial Legacies and Border Controls

Africa's borders were drawn during colonial rule, but continue to shape ISM. Rigid enforcement of these artificial boundaries fragments communities and constrains movement[51], even within regional blocs like the East African Community. Historically, African states often maintained porous borders[52], but recent years have seen increasing restrictions, sometimes modeled on European migration controls[53]. Consider the view of a Kenyan international student at KIU:

"…my biggest concern is that the maximum period I can use the students pass is one year, yet my course takes five years under normal progress. I have to keep renewing it every year…" (Interview, November 18th, 2022).

This response demonstrates the increased border controls, and for international students, this trend produces contradictory effects: regional agreements promise mobility, yet border practices emphasize surveillance and exclusion. The persistence of colonial legacies in contemporary policy underscores how ISM in East Africa remains entangled with broader questions of sovereignty, security, and belonging.

5.2. Current Policy Contradictions

The study reports policy contradictions associated with ISM in Uganda and the wider East African region. Some of such contradictions are presented and discussed below:

5.2.1. Residence Titles and Nationality-Based Differentiation

Most international students in Uganda hold a student pass, with East African nationals receiving it free of charge while others pay fees and face longer processing times. As explained by Jones[54], such nationality-based differentiation risks reducing diversity to a matter of passports, obscuring other factors such as class, ethnicity, and language[55]. Internationalization should expose students to diverse perspectives, enhance their understanding of global cultures, and prepare them to collaborate across linguistic and cultural boundaries[56]. These goals cannot be met if diversity is framed primarily through nationality. HEIs must broaden their approach by acknowledging the multidimensional nature of student diversity, including the implications of residence title classifications, to foster a more inclusive and ethical model of internationalization.

In addition, while the East African Community Common Market Protocol formally exempts East African students from visa fees, implementation gaps still exist, and students still encounter administrative inefficiencies or exclusion once in Uganda. Consider the response below:

"While I have always been ready and willing to comply with the immigration laws and regulations, the bureaucratic pass application process is so frustrating…" (Interview, November 19th, 2022).

International students from EAC member states are formally exempted from visa fees, and ideally, they should enjoy simplified access to student passes. However, this response highlights the gap between policy and practice, and how immigration frameworks can symbolically promote regional integration while reproducing barriers in everyday experience.

5.2.2. Administrative Access to Residence Titles

Survey results revealed that only 6.2% of international students found it difficult to obtain a residence title, while 59.0% reported the process as easy. Nonetheless, instances of administrative corruption were reported as shown in **Figure 1**.
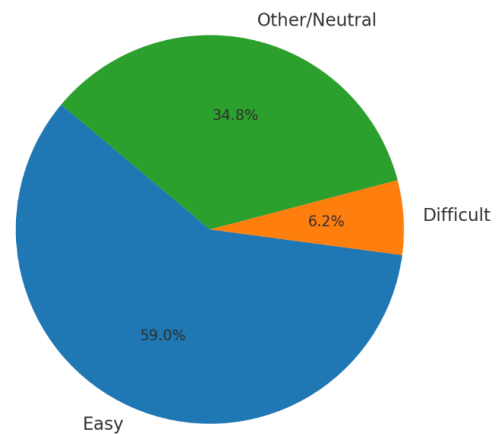
Figure 1. Students' Perceptions of the Ease of Obtaining Residence Titles.

One interviewee noted being asked for a bribe to expedite pass processing. These are his words:

"…. the immigration office has corrupt officials. One asked for money to make me 'cut the line' during the submission and biometric capturing. I gave him 20,000 Ugandan Shillings, and my file was processed shortly…" (Interview, November 15th, 2022).

This situation raises ethical questions and undermines the legitimacy of ISM processes. The visa procedures are better than they were in the past, contributing to the increase in Uganda's international student population[22]. This growth appears to be motivated more by economic gain than by a commitment to the principles of internationalization[57]. As noted by Knight[58], the commercialization erodes ISM of its original objectives. Rather than prioritizing profit, internationalization efforts should aim to improve teaching, research quality, and contribute meaningfully to society[59].

5.2.3. Employment Restrictions and Policy Contradictions

Under Uganda's student pass, international students are permitted to study but not to work as explained by a senior immigration officer:

"Each international student in Uganda must have a student pass [...]. The pass allows the student to stay and study in Uganda but not to work." (Interview, November 15, 2022)

This explains the survey results in which over 80% of respondents struggled to find jobs, citing immigration rules and a lack of opportunities as key barriers. As a result, more

than 90% reported being unemployed as shown in **Table 1** below:

Table 1. Summary of Key Survey Findings.

Variable	Percentage (%)
Students reporting unemployment	91.3
Students seeking part-time work	78.6
Students citing financial strain	82.1
Students reporting discrimination	34.7

(Source: Author's survey, 2022)

These patterns highlight the scale of unemployment and financial vulnerability among international students in Uganda, and create a striking contradiction. While international students contribute tuition fees and institutional diversity, they are excluded from the labor market, undermining their financial stability and professional development. The paradox is reinforced by Uganda's Employment Act (2006), which grants lawful residents equal employment rights, yet immigration practice denies students this access [60].

By selectively including international students as learners but excluding them as workers, the immigration policy reflects a broader global pattern: only the most "desirable" students—those who generate revenue without competing for jobs—are fully welcomed [61]. This tension exposes the ethical dilemmas of internationalization in Uganda, where openness is promoted rhetorically but constrained in practice. True internationalization aims to develop students' ability to live and work across diverse contexts [56]. A balanced approach could be drawn from countries like Australia and Canada, where international students are allowed limited work hours [19].

5.2.4. Brain Drain and Regional Human Resource Distribution

East African ISM policies must consider the broader risk of brain drain. As noted by Uganda's senior migration officer:

"Student mobility must be appropriately handled to avoid destabilizing nations and undoing their development efforts. [...] We must ensure movement does not become counterproductive." (Interview, November 15, 2022)

While attracting international students can bring economic and academic benefits, unregulated ISM may result in skilled labor shortages in sending countries. Scholars have expressed concern over the long-term impacts of South-North and intra-African brain drain on African universities

and economies [62–64].

Uganda's restriction on student employment may thus aim to encourage students to return home after graduation, helping stabilize regional human resource distribution. Yet, this solution creates tensions for students who must support themselves financially and gain work experience to complement their studies [65].

5.3. Structural Inequalities and Ethical Implications

Restricting international students' work rights reinforces their marginalization and replicates hierarchies rooted in colonial and global North models of migration control. These exclusions not only deny students opportunities but also reproduce forms of inequality among African peers. A South Sudanese participant explained:

"I tried to get a job several times without success, even when I was sure there was a vacant position. By mere physical appearance, they could say that they had no vacancies." (Interview, November 15, 2022).

Such experiences highlight how immigration restrictions intersect with racism and social exclusion, undermining ideals of reciprocity and regional solidarity. While discrimination exists globally [66], its replication in African contexts must be critically examined.

By importing restrictive logics from the global North, East Africa risks reinforcing the very injustices its HE systems aim to challenge. The North's historical framing of itself as the seat of logic and modernity has been critiqued [33], as it suppresses other ways of knowing. However, it should be noted that ethical frameworks are shaped within political contexts, not outside them [25]. Therefore, ethical internationalization requires more than facilitating student flows; it demands policies that affirm dignity, inclusion, and equity in both academic and social life.

5.4. Work, Skills Development, and the Labor Market

Uganda's limited job market raises a dilemma: how can international students gain work experience when local graduates already face high unemployment? Yet completely excluding students from employment undermines the very competencies that internationalization is supposed to foster.

Employers increasingly value soft skills such as communication, negotiation, and adaptability[67]. These can be developed through part-time jobs, internships, or service-learning opportunities. For international students, such experiences are not only financial lifelines but also vital components of their education.

A more balanced approach would allow students to engage in limited, study-related work without threatening local labor markets. Such opportunities would strengthen their academic experience while aligning internationalization with principles of reciprocity and fairness.

6. Conclusions

This study reveals that international students in Uganda encounter restrictive and often exclusionary immigration environments, particularly with respect to employment rights. While these students contribute financially and socially to HEIs, their opportunities to support themselves and develop professional skills remain constrained. These contradictions highlight the gap between the rhetoric of internationalization and the realities of immigration practice in East Africa.

Most international students wish to gain work experience while studying abroad not only to support themselves financially but also to build the competencies that internationalization purports to foster. From a human rights perspective, the right to employment should not be arbitrarily denied, especially when national legislation such as Uganda's Employment Act permits the employment of lawful residents. The study therefore underscores three key reflections. First, regional mobility frameworks such as the East African Community Protocol promise inclusion but are undermined by uneven implementation and administrative inefficiencies.

Second, while the study advocates for more inclusive employment policies for international students, it also acknowledges legitimate concerns: job markets in many parts of the global South, including Uganda, are already under

strain. Employing international students amid widespread local unemployment is a real dilemma. However, immigration provisions that deny work opportunities to international students replicate inequalities and neocolonial logics, limiting students' ability to thrive both academically and socially. Third, excluding students from the labor market undermines the very goals of internationalization, which include preparing graduates to live and work across diverse contexts.

These reflections carry broader ethical implications. Internationalization cannot be reduced to revenue generation or diversity counts; it must be rooted in principles of hospitality, reciprocity, and justice. Host institutions should therefore offer career support and employability training tailored toward post-study return, while sending countries remain actively involved in preparing students for reintegration. Further, allowing limited, study-related work or internships could serve as a middle ground that affirms students' dignity while addressing local labor concerns. More importantly, both host and sending countries share responsibility for ensuring that mobility strengthens (not undermines) educational opportunity and regional solidarity.

These reflections carry implications for multiple stakeholders. For policymakers, there is a need to ensure that regional agreements such as the EAC Protocol are implemented consistently, so that commitments to free movement are realized in practice. For universities, supporting international students requires more than recruitment: institutions can expand advisory services and create structured pathways for students to engage in internships, service-learning, and community-based projects. For governments, immigration frameworks could adopt middle-ground measures such as permitting limited, study-related part-time work, balancing student welfare with local labor concerns. Collectively, these shifts would better align internationalization with principles of justice, reciprocity, and solidarity.

In sum, this study demonstrates that intra-African ISM cannot be reduced to numbers of students or policy frameworks alone; it is also an ethical field shaped by histories, inequalities, and contested ideas of reciprocity. By foregrounding African voices and the lived realities of mobility in Uganda, the paper reframes ethics not as abstract principle but as a practical question of rights, justice, and hospitality within internationalization. It invites scholars, policymakers, and institutions to critically reconsider how inter-

nationalization is practiced, asking: *Who is included, who is excluded, and what kind of educational futures are being created through these choices?* This reframing challenges Eurocentric narratives and contributes to a more plural, de-colonial understanding of how higher education mobility can and should be governed.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Bayreuth (Approval date: 15 May 2022, no protocol code was assigned).

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

The datasets used and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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